Gender Issues and Intricacies in Shobha De's Select Novels

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Abstract
Shobha De, a feminist writer, depicts her female protagonists in a forceful way and uses the plot to emphasize her point that personal is not private but political. The protagonists in her works were outspoken critics of conventional society and its rules. They are not the typical women who accept abusive, unsatisfying, or uncomfortable relationships (in all aspects). It could be male dominance, objectification, sexual discontent, passion, or something else entirely. They don't keep it hidden because they believe it is taboo. On the other hand, the male characters are not shown as villains, but it is evident from the plot that they are products of patriarchal society. Gender issues in her works aren't about female oppression in terms of domestic violence; rather, they are about the sexual vacuum that all of the female characters experience. Male characters were traditionally assigned duties such as sexually active, powerful, and have self-identity, but these female figures defy such stereotypes. They represent women by demonstrating that they too have sexual wants, power, and a need for self-identity. As a result, this research focuses on Shobha De's novels *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Sisters* (1992), *Starry Nights* (1991), *Second Thoughts* (1996), which all deal with gender issues. The study not only examines issues but sheds light on the protagonists' struggles to find self-identity.

Keywords: Gender Issues, Privacy, Identity, Subjectivity, Quest

Women's enslavement and suffering have long been a hot topic in the world of gender issues. It's critical to investigate the creation and execution of objectification in order to comprehend why women are objectified. When it comes to sustaining the hierarchy between men and women, there are two extremes. One is of the home ritual hierarchy, in which only men have entitlement and women have no access; women should not be frank, private, or expected to abide. The social level is where women are denied the same political, educational, and economic position as males. As we move forward, we can see how cultural oppression affects women, particularly at home, by restricting their physical and mental capabilities. This is significantly more dehumanizing than economic exploitation, which we incorrectly believe to be the most prevalent element. Thus, the primary motivation for this design is to deny subjectivity and objectify women in order to sustain the patriarchal structure. Gender and gendering are closely linked to denying subjectivity in all aspects. In her works, Shobha De has demonstrated how personal and emotional space is more vital than economic independence for women, with the majority of her heroines belonging to the upper-class educated yet struggling with

self-identity. Despite their comfortable economic freedom, they encounter gender challenges on private grounds in search of self-identity, emotional, and sexual comfort.

Gender is primarily thought to be socially created. It reflects a variety of factors such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, social class, physical ability, age, and so forth. But, in reality, we must accept that each and every person is unique.

> After all, some men are more emotional than others, some women have more power and success than others, some men perform their fair share—or more—of housework and child care, and some women find sex with males to be both joyful and empowering. Indeed, contemporary gender relations are complex and changing in various directions, and as such, we need to be wary of simplistic, if handy, slogans that seem to sum up the essence of relations between women and men. (Zinn, 1)

In her works, Shobha De tries to represent human relations through the lenses of gender, personal wants, and vacuum. She has not only highlighted the gender construction in society as a writer, but she has also depicted the attempts of her female protagonists to break free from such structures. They stood up for themselves, explored their sexuality, sought to connect with their bodies, and so on during their rebellious path. They prefer to be the representatives of difference rather than generalizing women and their qualities. All four novels provide a great sketch of distinct female characters, through which Shobha De, as a feminist, conveys her point that each woman is unique and has unique experiences. Her novels, *Socialite Evenings, Sisters, Starry Nights, and Second Thoughts*, not only chronicle the lives of various women, but also the challenges that they face in their daily lives and their fight to find self-identity in various dimensions.

Karuna, an upper-class young woman who is courageous and economically independent in *Socialite Evenings*, defies society's conventions by having pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. In her quest, she seeks respect and decency. Even though she is financially secure, she is in need of emotional and sexual comfort, and she eventually achieves self-realization. Mallika (Mikki) and her half-sister Alisha are two distinct women in *Sisters*. Mikki, a well-educated lady, is both emotional and experienced in dealing with life's difficulties, desiring freedom despite her financial independence. The latter is emotional, naïve, young, and inexperienced, and seeks vengeance on Mikki for her father's rejection. Alisha has a self-sufficient life; however, she is unique due to her lack of life experiences. The plot is around the contrast between the sisters and their journey through society, relationships in their lives, and how their knowledge brings them together at the end. It is through their experiences that the sisters realize that sisterhood allows them to be emotionally and financially independent.

In *Starry Nights*, Asha Rani, a well-known film star who has been exploited by her mother, producers, actors, and others, is discovered to be a homosexual. The tale follows her change from Viji to Asha Rani for the Bollywood industry. Aside from fame and financial security, she wants dignity and subjectivity in her quest. Maya, a middle-class woman, yearns for a sophisticated lifestyle and marries a well-educated man (Ranjan) from abroad to reside in Mumbai in the novel *Second Thoughts*. However, she quickly realizes that her dreams are traumatic, and she seeks emotional support and self-respect through an adulterous romance, which also fails. Shobha De brings out how Maya was exploited by both her husband and lover.

The protagonist Karuna evolves through her courageous self-exploration in a building-roman style in *Socialite Evenings*. She also slips into the trap of marriage, where she has a tumultuous relationship with her husband, who dismisses her feelings and interests while yet attempting to control

them. She is fearless in her decision-making, and she comes from a marital existence in which she tended to seek emotional comfort and a self-respecting spouse. In her search for the comfortable and enjoyable life she desired, she began having premarital and extramarital affairs, which she did not regard as taboo, but rather as a normal occurrence. This sticks out as a unique remark of how women deal with gender issues. Their private concerns are more essential than the public equality they receive because private gender issues generate far more mental anguish than public arena rejection. She is not like Maya, who, despite her dislikes, stays in the marriage despite being a rebellious woman. Her rebellious nature begins when she refuses to call her spouse by his name, as Nandhini Ahlawat vociferously said in *"A Study of Difficulty and Socialite in Novel of Shobha De"*:

> Karuna's husband sees her as a problem, a non-essential item subject to his own whims. Karuna clearly just has a formal relationship with her significant other. The closeness between the couple is missing for Karuna who never calls her better half by his name yet disdainfully as a Black label. (Ahlawat, 2)

She not only demonstrated that she didn't want to stay in the marriage because she didn't like the way she was treated, but she also had an adulterous affair with her husband's buddy. She even went for odd jobs after her divorce to maintain her financial independence, and she never compromises in her pursuit of self-respect, which is the basis for her failure in all of her relationships. Finally knows who she is and recognizes that being alone is financially and emotionally comfortable for her. Because according to her marriage should be more than just a source of financial support or security for women; it should also provide a safe haven and respect for women's needs.

In her work *Sisters*, Shobha De demonstrates the importance of forming sisterhood among women while dealing with a variety of challenges. Mikki (Mallika) and Alisha who is Mallika's half-sister were in different situations and had various challenges, which caused them to become estranged, but they eventually realized that despite their differences, they could stay together to morally support each other. Mikki is an international graduate who returns to India after the death of her parents, where she discovers her father's secret connection with Alisha's mother, by which she becomes her half-sister. Mikki was assigned to take over her parents' corporate lives in order to manage their firm. Despite her best efforts to regain a sense of balance in handling new business, she eventually realizes the men in her company's blunders. They regularly try to dissuade her from pursuing a career in business management as a woman, with Ramankaka being one of the most vocal opponents.

> Had you been a son your father might have taken you into his confidence from a young age and guided you properly from the beginning. But as a daughter, all he wanted for you was a good husband – that is all. My advice is – leave these serious matters to me. I am there to handle them. Trust me. I will guard your interests like a father. But you will make things difficult for yourself if you do things without consulting me. (De, 30)

But she handles all those hurdles boldly which shows her strength in handling things in the public arena. This could be explicitly seen when she boldly speaks for her opinions to Ramankaka,

> Thank you for your advice, Ramankaka, I appreciate and value your words. But I'd like you to hear a few of Mine now. I can't change my Sex, unfortunately, that is the one thing all of you will have to accept. But I can change just about everything else . . . and I intend to. . . I don't expect you or the others to give up your prejudices – but I want you to know that I will not let that stand in my way. (De, 30)

She (Mikki) has gender challenges following her marriage while being an independent woman. She is not allowed to run her business. When she senses emptiness in her life, she tries to fill it by persuading her husband. But she fails at this, and as a result of her undying love for her husband, she falls prey to the comforting effects of alcohol. But she is not a woman who sacrifices her life for love; she understands that love is merely a part of life, not life itself. Subjectivity and respectability are equally vital in a woman's personal and social life. Alisha, on the other hand, is self-reliant and has developed a disdain for Mallika as a result of the machinations of those around her. She has a tendency to rebel with Mallika in order to find her own identity. Mallika, on the other hand, was always determined to reintegrate her half-sister into her life. Thus, Shobha De here introduces two-dimensional gender difficulties: one who faces gender issues at work and at her in-law's, and the other who faces gender issues as an illicit daughter despite being financially well.

Shobha De does not shy away from depicting gender concerns in the public lives of actors, which she does so forcefully in *Starry Nights*. Viji's mother takes advantage of her because she was born into an impoverished home. To make money, she is forced to perform in blue films. Later, she worked hard to become a Bollywood actress, which required her to sleep with male producers and actors. Only in this way does she become a well-known Bollywood actress. Despite her best efforts to free herself from the constraints of gender issues, she finds herself exploited. As a result, in order to fight against men's exploitation, she takes advantage of their vulnerability to make them fall for her. Shobha De in this novel gives a guileless portrayal of sex and gender issues that are well opined by Ghai in the article "The study of feminism in selected works of Shobha De".

> Starry Nights took the literary world by storm for its frank portrayal of sex and exploitation. The novel is a faithful portrayal of the Mumbai film world, with all its glamour, deceits and physical exploitation of women. The protagonist, Aasha Rani, on her road to stardom manipulates many men, right from the level of assistant producer, to important underworld dons and industrialists. Thus, beating men at their own game is the strategy that Aasha Rani resorts to throughout the novel (Ghai, 3).

In her search for self-identity, Asha Rani discovers that she is a lesbian. This is the most significant gender issue hidden in her unconscious self, which was suppressed by her mother's and society's roles that made her a woman locked in a hetero-sexual relationship.

The traditional Indian gendering is quite strongly shown in *Second Thoughts*, where Maya, who wishes to live in the city and desires to be a working woman, is restrained by everyone in her in-law's house. She considered herself fortunate to have married a wealthy, well-educated man, but her marriage is becoming increasingly bitter as she learns that her subjectivity is being ignored. She is barred from looking for a job. This becomes the most customary tradition followed in every in-laws' house. A woman is stopped from going for a job in order to maintain the gender hierarchy. Because if she tends to move out of the house for a job she is exposed to society and will develop a confidence to speak for her which will directly affect the gender hierarchy. This it becomes problematic to maintain the structure of hierarchy. Men are given preference over women here, resulting in the mental harassment that every woman endures at home.

De is not depicting the usual gender issues like dowry; it's all about a woman trying to get a hold of her own which is denied by Maya's uncle who advises, "In an Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows." (ST, 11) For which everyone in the family also agrees and Ranjan being an American University graduate but orthodox, he himself thought, "It is a woman's duty to run a good home" (ST, 11). Not only her career is affected but also her emotional

and physical comfort is denied. Whenever she seeks sexual pleasure she is denied by Ranjan, who is very ambitious, selfish, and workaholic. She is even insulted by her loveless husband as, "Are you that sex-starved? Nothing else on your mind? How can sex being so important to anybody, I've never understood". (ST, 351). After which she feels dejected and was drawn by the behavior of Nikhil, who tends to recognize her suffering and gives her the space to share her interests. Nikhil was the companion who could be seen as the whole husband model of her expectations. Nikhil is a man with all such qualities for whom she yearned. Her sense of yearning for a physically and emotionally satisfactory relationship could be sensed in Maya's words as:

> Every bit of me was suddenly alive to the feel of Nikhil's lips, hands, arms, neck, chest, knees, and legs. An unknown recklessness started to sweep over me. Maybe I was going crazy. I did not want to think of consequences. I refused to assume responsibility. I really didn't care one way or the other. I felt free, lunatic, and wonderful. (ST, 375)

This is one of the most important gender concerns that every woman experiences, although it is rarely depicted honestly by authors. Women writers, as much as men, have written works that are purposefully or subconsciously oriented toward the male gaze. However, writers such as Kamala Das and Shobha De were remarkable in that they were constantly cognizant of bringing to light the genuine gender challenges that women experience in both private and public life. As Carol Hanisch in his article "The Personal is Political" opines,

> They could sometimes admit that women were oppressed (but only by 'the system') and said that we should have equal pay for equal work and some other 'rights.' But they belittled us no end for trying to bring our so-called "personal problems" into the public arena—especially 'all those body issues' like sex, appearance, and abortion. (Hanisch, 1)

Shobha De's women characters were from various backgrounds, experiences, and challenges, and as a result, they dealt with various types of resistance in their quest for self-identity and respect. De is meticulous in keeping each character and their traits distinct in order to demonstrate that gender issues cannot be generalized. Despite the fact that feminists join groups to protest together, their issues and experiences are diverse. Thus, we were able to identify women in various situations, such as Karuna, who is married and independent but has gender issues in her relationships, Maya, who is devastated by her married life and lacks physical and emotional comfort from her husband feels lonely at home, Asha, who has gender issues in the film industry, and Alisha and Mallika, who have gender issues both at home and at the workspace. Thus, Shobha De, despite her Indian heritage, is an outspoken writer who depicts gender issues from all angles to demonstrate how women are denied subjectivity. She also portrays how, although sharing the same gender, their difficulties and battles are distinct, which is why contemporary feminists oppose the rule that lumps women and their problems together.

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